Sacred Groves in Oraon Tribe: A Symbolic Interpretation for Understanding their Natural Spaces

Proposed Synopsis for the Research Study
For the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Anthropology

Department of Anthropology, Ranchi University, Ranchi
(Faculty of Social Science)
2024

Name of the Supervisor

Dr. Sirista J. Meenz
Assistant professor
University Department of Anthropology
Ranchi University

Name of the Candidate

Dilip Kumar Oraon
Research scholar
University Department of Anthropology
Ranchi University

Table of Content

Chapter	Title	Page no.
1	A brief introduction of the topic	1
2	State of art	3
3	Problem to investigate	4
4	Objective of the investigation and motivation	4
5	Research questions	5
6	Research design and research methodology	5
7	Source of data and tool to be used in collection of data	6
8	Analysis of data	7
9	Significance of the study	7
10	It relevance to the present day problem and need to the society	7
11	Contribution to the existing knowledge	7
12	Future works	7
13	Tentative chapterisation	8
14	Reference	8

A brief introduction of research topic

Sacred groves in India are integral to the cultural, religious, and ecological fabric of the country. These patches of protected forests hold deep spiritual significance for local communities, often serving as places of worship dedicated to specific deities or spirits. Beyond their cultural importance, sacred groves play a vital rolein biodiversity conservation, acting as natural sanctuaries for a diverse array of plant and animal species. Traditional community rules and beliefs govern these groves, with strict restrictions on entry to ensure their preservation

Sacred groves have long served as sanctuaries of nature, embodying a harmonious relationship between communities and their environment. In the context of the Oraon Tribe, a distinctive ethnic group with deep-rooted traditionsin India, sacred groves play a pivotal role in shaping their rituals, mythologies, and cultural practices.

The Oraon tribe follows Sarna Dharam, where "Sarna" means sacred grove. Their religion is rooted in oral traditions passed down through generations, deeply intertwined with their culture and respect for the natural world. Central to their belief is one God, the Supreme Being known as Dharmesh. Dharmesh, regardedas the Great Spirit, the Creator, and the ruler of the universe, is believed to manifest in Sal trees. According to Oraon philosophy, Dharmesh is the most powerful and significant deity, responsible for the creation of the universe and the ancestors, and acting as a protector. In Kurukh, Dharmesh means the almighty and is also referred to as Mahaedeo.

The purity of Dharmesh demands that offerings be only white items, such as whitegoats, white fowls, white gulainchi flowers, white cloth, sugar, and milk. White is considered a sacred color among the Oraon tribe and many other Adivasi communities.

Among the many deities, Chala-Pacho Maa (Sarna Maa) is highly revered. The village diety Chala-Pacho is envisioned as a caring elderly lady with beautifully flowing white hair. The Sal tree is believed to be the holy abode of Sarna Maa, the mother goddess who protects and nurtures the Oraon tribe. During the Sarhul festival, the village priest, known as Pahan, performs special rituals for the Maa. According to Sarna Dharam, the Maa resides in the wooden soop of the Pahan, kept at the Chala-Kutti place, an auspicious spot in the Pahan's home. Here, a stick made of Sal or Bamboo wood is fixed to the ground, and the sacred wooden soop, called Sarna-Soop, is believed to be the residence of Sarna-Maa.

Oraon perform rituals under Sal trees at a place called Sarna (sacred grove), resembling a small forest patch. In Oraon villages, one can easilyfind a Sarna with holy Sal trees and other trees. Sometimes, Sarna are located in nearby forests rather than within the village.

The Sarna serves as a communal religious site for the entire village,hosting significant socio-religious ceremonies. These ceremonies involve the whole village community and are led by the village priest (Pahan).

As we step into the shadowed embrace of these groves, we embark on a journey into the soul of the Oraon tribe. Each rustle of leaves, every ancient tree, and the soft murmur of the wind seem to echo with the stories, myths, and traditions thathave been passed down through the ages. The sacred groves are, therefore, more than mere physical spaces. They are living narratives, repositories of wisdom, and embodiments of the spiritual consciousness that defines the Oraon people.

In this exploration of the sacred groves within the Oraon tribe, we peel back the layers of time and tradition, seeking to understand the profound significance of these hallowed woodlands. Here, the natural and the supernatural converge, as rituals are performed, prayers are offered, and a sacred dialogue unfolds between the Oraon community and the spirits believed to inhabit these ancient boughs. The groves, with their vibrant energy and mystic aura, become a bridge between the tangible and the transcendent.

These sacred groves are not frozen in the past; they are dynamic spaces where the Oraon people continue to engage with their cultural roots. The groves serve as communal spaces for ceremonies marking life's milestones—births, marriages, and transitions to the spirit world. As the Oraon tribe grapples with the complexities of the modern world, the sacred groves remain stead fast, providinga timeless sanctuary where the essence of Oraon spirituality and heritage is safeguarded.

To truly grasp the significance of the sacred groves in the Oraon tribe is to delve into the heart of their worldview—a worldview that sees humanity as an integral part of nature, inseparable from the spirits that dwell within the groves. These sacred spaces are not just a reflection of Oraon beliefs; they are a living embodiment of the tribe's harmonious relationship with the environment, where trees are not mere bystanders but revered companions in the journey of life.

This exploration will navigate the multifaceted dimensions of the Oraon Tribe's engagement with sacred groves. From the elaborate rituals conducted within these hallowed spaces to the myths that breathe life into the surrounding flora and fauna, each aspect unveils a unique perspective on the tribe's commitment to the preservation of biodiversity. Moreover, the cultural practices enacted within groves not only reflect the tribe's ethos but also serve as custodians of ecological equilibrium, embodying a holistic approach to environmental stewardship.

The research aim to the layers of symbolism embedded in the Oraon Tribe's sacred groves, this study aims to contribute to a nuanced understanding of the interplay between culture, spirituality, and conservation. By unraveling the intricacies of their rituals, mythologies, and cultural practices, The research aim to shed light on the role these sacred groves play in fostering a sustainable and spiritually resonant coexistence between the Oraon Tribe and their natural surroundings.

State of the art

The sacred groves, known as "Sarna," hold profound cultural, religious, and ecological significance for the Oraon tribes in Jharkhand. These groves, traditionally conserved patches of forest, serve as sites for religious rituals, social gatherings, and the preservation of cultural heritage. However, the sacred groves of the Oraon community face numerous challenges today. Through a comprehensive review of existing literature on these sacred groves, this research aims to understand their current state and identify gaps in knowledge that warrant further investigation. This literature review will inform ongoing conservation efforts and raise awareness, contributing to the preservation of these vital cultural and ecological treasures.

Review of literature

Malhotra, K. C., Gokhale, Y., Chatterjee, S. and Srivastava, S. (2007) they provide a comprehensive overview of sacred groves in India, examining their ecological significance, cultural importance, and the role they play in biodiversity conservation. It explores the historical and spiritual dimensions of these groves.

Fikret Berkes (1999) discusses the relationship between nature and culture in his influential work. While not solely focused on sacred groves, the book explores the intertwined nature of human societies and their environments.

J.J. Roy Burman (2003) explores Sacred groves, often linked to deities, especially fieryones, are reexamined in this book. It dispels myths surrounding these forests, focusing on their environmental management as a secondary consequence of theirprimary cultural and religious significance. The book emphasizes the contingentnature of their ecological benefits.

Geertz, C. (1973). In his work on interpretive anthropology conceptualizes culture as a system of symbols, explored through "thick description." This approach, seeing culture as a "web of significance," it forms the symbolic anthropology framework of this research, particularly in examining the Oraon community's rituals and sacred groves in Jharkhand.

Turner, V. (1967). Turner explores the symbolic dimensions of rituals among the Ndembu people of Zambia. He focuses on the concept of "symbols in action," emphasizing the role of rituals in social processes and how symbols are used to convey complex meanings within a culture. Turner's work is foundational in symbolic anthropology, particularly in understanding the dynamic and performative aspects of culture.

S.C. Roy's (1915) offers a foundational ethnographic account of the Oraon tribe, focusing on their social structure, religious practices, and cultural traditions. Despite its colonial-era biases, the book remains an essential reference in tribal studies, providing crucial insights into the Oraon community of Jharkhand.

Eliza F. Kent (2013) explores the intersections of religion, environmentalism, and sacred groves in South India. His study delves into the cultural and ecological aspects, shedding light on how local gods and spiritual beliefs contribute to conservationefforts

L.P. Vidyarthi and Binay R. (1996) offers a comprehensive exploration of India's diverse tribal communities. The authors examine cultural practices, social organization, and the impact of modernization, highlighting both challenges and opportunities. This work serves as a vital resource for understanding the richness of tribal life in India.

Susmita Poddar (2019) explores the profound cultural and ecological significance of Santal sacred groves. It highlights their role in community identity, spiritual practices, and biodiversity conservation, while addressing contemporary challenges like urbanization and cultural dilution, advocating for the preservation of these vital spaces.

Problem to be investigated

The problem is to investigate ‘Sacred Groves in Oraon Tribe: A Symbolic Interpretation for Understanding of their Natural Spaces’. The sacred groves, or Sarna, Sarna Sthal, of the Oraon tribes in Jharkhand face several challenges despite ongoing conservation efforts. Community-led initiatives and support from government and NGOs are vital but need further evaluation for effectiveness. Urbanization, land encroachment, and deforestation pose significant threats, while cultural erosion and youth disengagement weaken traditional practices. Understanding the role of government and NGOs, along with traditional community management practices, is critical for preserving these culturally and ecologically significant areas.

Objectives of the investigation and motivation

1. To document cultural practices performed in sacred groves of the oraon tribe.
2. To examine ritual practices by the oraon tribe in sacred groves.
3. To explore mythological narratives related to the sacred groves of the oraon tribe.
4. To identify threats, challenges regarding sacred groves.
5. To propose sustainable strategies for preservation and conservation of sacred groves.

Research question

1. How do Oraon ceremonies, festivals, and community events in the sacred groves preserve the environment and strengthen community bonds ?
2. What are the rituals performed by the Oraon Tribe in the sacred groves ?
3. How do the myths and stories associated with the Oraon Tribe's sacred groves ?
4. What are the potential threats and challenges faced by the Oraon Tribe's sacred groves ?
5. What sustainable strategies can be proposed for the conservation of Oraon tribe's sacred groves ?

Research design and research methodology

The research employs qualitative method, such as in-depth interviews and participant observation, to gather insights into the Oraon community's cultural practices related to their sacred groves. Through, the lens of symbolic anthropology, the study aims to provide an understanding of how the Oraon people interact with impact with modernization, interpreting their cultural symbols, rituals, and practices to reveal the deeper meanings they attach to their sacred groves.

Field Area- Jharkhand, known as "The Land of Forests," is a state in eastern India, created on 15 November 2000 from the southern half of Bihar. It borders Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, and West Bengal, covering an area of 79,714 km². Ranchi is its capital, with Dumka as the sub-capital. The state is renowned for its natural beauty and religious sites. The Oraons, the second largest indigenous group in Jharkhand, speak a Kurukh language and comprise 19.60 percent of the state's population, with 1,716,618 people according to the 2011 Census. They are predominantly found in the districts of Ranchi, Gumla, Lohardaga, Latehar, Palamu, Garhwa, Hazaribagh, Dhanbad, Santhal Pargana, and Singhbhum.

For the present study the research will be focus on the four district of Jharkhand are Ranchi, Gumla, Lohardega and Simdega

Sample Size -A sample size of 400 Oraon individuals in Jharkhand in the district of the

S.No.	District	block	Village	Sample Size
1	Ranchi	Kanke	Jaipur	100
		Ratu	Harmu	
2	Gumla	Sisai	Kurgi	100
			Gamhariya	
3	Lohardaga	Bhandra	Jhiko	100
		Kairo	Gajni	
4	Simdega	Simdega	Saldega	100
			Madhuban	

Ranchi, Gumla, Lohardaga, and Simdega is considered robust for anthropological research, offering high statistical power and reliable generalizability.

Employing random sampling methods ensures capturing the diversity in age, gender, and socioeconomic status with enhancing the validity and reliability of the research findings.

Source of data and tool to be used in collection of data

Primary source - Primary data collection will include anthropological fieldwork through participant observation, interviews. Researchers will immerse in the community, gathering qualitative insights on social structures and cultural practices. Interviews will capture personal narratives.

Secondary source - For secondary data collection will include a literature review of academic sources to identify research gaps, and review government reports. Utilize historical records and photographs to trace the evolution of cultural practices.

The research will employ unstructured interviews and participant observation to gather data. Observations will be documented using structured checklists or expert insights. Photography and video will capture images, enhanced by recent mobile technology. Case studies will

provide in-depth insights, combining interviews, observations, text, photos, or videos. Stories of change will highlight shifts post-project initiation. Interview schedules will guide the questioning, ensuring key topics are addressed while allowing flexible responses. These tools collectively support comprehensive data collection and evaluation.

Analysis of Data

The data collected from both primary and secondary source will analysis thought lens of symbolic interpretative anthropology. Descriptive analysis along with GIS mapping, and tabulation method will be used for analysis the data This comprehensive approach shall provide deep insights into the Oraon community's cultural practices and their interaction with geographic and social factors.

Significance of the study

This research is vital for understanding the cultural and ecological significance of sacred groves among the Oraon community in Jharkhand. It examines the impact of modernization and religious conversion, while contributing to social cohesion, policy-making, and academic knowledge. The study highlights the need to protect these cultural and natural heritage sites which will aid in preservation and conservation of oraon tribe of Jharkhand.

It relevance to the present day problem and need to the society

Research on sacred groves in the Oraon tribe highlights their relevance to present day problems and societal needs by addressing environmental conservation, cultural heritage preservation, and community cohesion. It offers insights into sustainable development, and aids conflict resolution, contributing to a more harmonious coexistence in diverse societies.

Contribution to the existing knowledge

The research on Oraon sacred groves contributes by providing localized insights into their cultural practices, documenting the impact of modernization, and highlighting community resilience. It informs conservation policy and offers a framework for studying similar contexts, while enriching global comparative studies and amplifying indigenous voices in broader discussions.

Future works

Future work on Oraon's sacred groves could include comparative cross-cultural analysis, exploring climate change impacts, engaging youth in cultural transmission, digital documentation, advocating for community rights, and assessing eco-tourism potential, all to deepen understanding and promote preservation of sacred groves.

Tentative chapterisation

The research study is divided into 7 chapters,

Chapter 1: Introduction

Chapter-2: Culture practices in sacred groves of the oraon tribe

Chapter-3: Ritual practices of Oraon tribe

Chapter-4: Mythological Narrative of the sacred groves

Chapter-5: Threats and challenges regarding preservation

Chapter-6: Sustainable strategies for the Conservation of sacred groves

Chapter-7: Conclusion

Reference

1. Census India (2024) Blocks in Ranchi district, Jharkhand - Census 2011, https://www.censusindia.co.in/subdistricts/block-ranchi-district-jharkhand-364#google_vignette
2. Chakraborty, P. (2019*), Socio-cultural aspects of sacred grove: The study in a Santal village*. Volume-1, Issue-1, Jan-Feb-2019
3. Das, S. (2020) *A brief study of the sacred groves of Jharkhand and their non-brahmin priests*, Volume 2; Issue 1; 2020; Page No. 24-28
4. Dr. Paras Nath Jha (2018), *Sacred groves- A plea for revival and restoration for the green economy of Jharkhand* (A Case Study of Santhal Tribe & their contribution), Vol 9 Issue 4, Page No.532-539.
5. Dr. Ramdayal Munda Tribal Welfare Research Institute (2024), oraon people, https://www.trijharkhand.in/en/oraon#:~:text=ORAON%20PEOPLE,to%20the%20Dravidian%20language%20family.
6. Geertz, C. (1973), *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, Basic Books.
7. Government of Jharkhand (2024), Jharkhand At a Glance, https://www.jharkhand.gov.in/
8. Government of Jharkhand, Directorate of Culture (2024), Oraon,

https://jharkhandculture.com/node/53#

9. Kandari. L. S, Bisht. V.K, Bhardwaj. M, and Thakur. A.K, (2014), *Conservation and management of sacred groves, myths and beliefs of tribal communities: a case study from north-India*, Environmental Systems Research.
10. Laisram, R. (2023), *Sacred groves, cultural ecosystems and conservation*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
11. M. Amirthalingam (2016), *Sacred Groves of India – An Overview*, International Journal of Current Research in Biosciences and Plant Biology, Volume 3, Number 4, pp. 64-74
12. Madhav Gadgil (2018), Sacred Groves: An Ancient Tradition of Nature Conservation, https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/sacred-groves-an-ancient-tradition-of-nature-conservation/
13. Malhotra, K. C., Gokhale, Y., & Das, K. (2001), *Sacred groves of India*, Development Alliance.
14. Mitra. B, (2023), Present Status of The Sacred Groves in India with Special Reference to West Bengal. In Maiti. P, & Mitra. B, (Eds)., *ETHNOBOTANY & ETHNOZOOLOGY* (265-303). Bharti Publications, New Delhi-110002
15. Nanditha Krishna & M. Amirthalingam (2014), *Sacred Groves of India a Compendium*, Silver Jubilee Year Publication
16. Niyogi, D. G. (2019, December). Protecting Jharkhand's groves of faith. Mongabay India. https://india.mongabay.com/2019/12/protecting-sarna-jharkhands-groves-of-faith/
17. R. Sameeta and H. Solanki (2015), *Trees Protected by the Bhil Community: A Case Study of Sacred Groves in Dahod District of Gujarat*. International Conference on Biodiversity, Ernaculam.
18. Roy, S. C. (1915). *The Oraons of Chota Nagpur: Their history, economic life, and social*. Abhijeet Publications.
19. Turner, V. (1967). *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*, Cornell University Press.
20. Vidyarthi, L. P., & Binay, R. (1996). *The Tribal Culture Of India*. Concept Publishing Committee.